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# PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND VERTEBRATE PEST RESEARCH

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# PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND VERTEBRATE PEST RESEARCH

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In our efforts to investigate environmental concerns, such as vertebrate pests, we as scientists too often neglect or fail to recognize the importance and value of strong public relations. Most scientists would agree that public relations and public education are honorable components of research, but time is often a precious commodity to be utilized in resolving the ecological problem under investigation. Additionally, in many situations, due either to the personality of the researcher or public sensitivity to the problem area, many scientists shy away from public interaction.

In the vertebrate pest field, we often deal with ecological problems that stem from social or economic situations. Since our research and pest control activities are strongly linked to man and his environment, it is exceptionally important that we know how to interact with people in order to achieve public understanding of how research is conducted, why certain control practices are implemented, and acceptance of pest management practices. Since much of our research and control activities are dependent upon information supplied by non-scientists, the efficiency and effectiveness of our efforts are enhanced by an ability to communicate. We must be able to ask the right questions, but we also must be able to provide correct and understandable answers.

Over the past several years, we have been investigating many aspects of the ecology and natural history of the barn owl (*Tyto alba*) as part of an intensive investigation of secondary poisoning hazard due to rodenticide use on farms. This study has required tremendous public relations and communication ability on our part in dealing with the attitudes and concerns of the public. Therefore, let us consider the barn owl and our investigation of toxic chemical hazard as a "model" from which to address and characterize public relations in the environmental field. Descriptions of the people and situations that we encountered in our work should exemplify the need for, and benefits from, communication practices and should be comparable to many situations that you have or may encounter.

The barn owl, known by its heart-shaped facial disc, is a bird of open country and agricultural habitats; it often roosts or nests on farmsteads. As a result of this strong tie to man and his agricultural activities, many people in rural areas are highly familiar with this bird. However, as we found out while conducting research in southern New Jersey, there are many misconceptions about the bird and ecological parameters such as toxic poisoning hazards. Because of our need to check many farmsteads for owls and to work

on farms where they were located, permission from many property owners and a great deal of communication was required. Situations, comments, and attitudes which we had to deal with ranged from comical to exceptionally serious.

The first problem is defining and justifying the categorization of a bird as a pest species. To one group of people a bird species undoubtedly may be a pest or nuisance due to its foraging behavior, roosting, or nesting habits, while other people are staunchly protective of it due to their aesthetic, conservation, or animal rights beliefs.

We encountered people who considered the barn owl to be the ultimate nuisance bird. They complained about such things as not being able to sleep at night due to the loud begging calls of young in the tree outside their window as well as the white-wash left by the owls. Some also claimed that owls represented evil spirits, or that because there was a poor muskrat (*Ondatra zibethica*) harvest, barn owls must have eaten them all. Where do you start when faced with these comments, which were typically delivered to us in an abrupt manner?

The one thing that we never did was argue these points; we listened. Then, in an exceptionally friendly manner, we explained that we understood their concerns. That, yes, they can be loud and leave lots of white-wash in areas where they roost. However, they consume large numbers of rodents; less than 2% of their prey are birds, and muskrat is an extremely rare barn owl prey item. Additionally, because the bird is beneficial, farmers greatly appreciate having them around. We might explain at this point that we would "give" them a barn owl nest box, so the owls could nest in the barn or silo instead of the tree and be less noticeable when the young are large and highly vocal. Also, at some point, we would try to work into the conversation, in a very non-threatening way, that the birds are protected by state and federal laws.

Attitudes might not change instantaneously, but with time and patience they often do. For example, at one site in 1981, a farmer's wife told us that the birds were the worst creatures on earth, they kept her awake at night, and that we were to get off the property. By 1983 the same woman was thrilled when she got a chance to hold the owl after we captured and banded it. She had a problem with moles digging up her yard, and the key to her attitude change was to show her owl pellets at the base of the nest tree that contained the remains of moles. We now have a barn owl nest box in her silo.

In sharp contrast to those individuals we encountered who disliked barn owls, we also dealt with many people who liked them. However, some of these people disliked our intentions as much as those people who disliked the birds. On many farms owls had nested for years, and a possessive attitude by property owners had evolved. Our interest in banding young or capturing adults often was met with comments of "Leave OUR owls alone!" and "Why can't you go somewhere else?". The situation sometimes became more tense when property owners heard that we were studying toxic hazards to the owls and using rodenticide in the area to determine any detrimental effects. Explanation that a chemical company was funding the project sometimes also added to the skepticism and immediate conclusions that toxic chemicals were responsible for changes in barn owl populations.

We needed to gain access to the owls and properties to do our research, and therefore we patiently addressed each of the property owners' concerns. We explained our background of working with the birds, showed state and federal permits, invited them to stay up at night and watch us radio-equip an adult owl, discussed mortality factors (such as predation by raccoons, electrocution, and winter cold), offered to give them and install a barn owl nest box that would provide a secure nest site, and noted the different wildlife and environmental organizations that were supportive of the project. We also would discuss how drastic changes in barn owl populations in portions of the United States, such as Ohio, have been principally due to habitat loss, reduction in grassland foraging habitat and associated secure nest sites, and that current data indicate that toxic chemicals in general have not played a major role in barn owl population changes.

The need to use understandable terminology while explaining all of these factors is

exemplified by one property owner, who believed that "Nest boxes are traps in which scientists place poison to kill owls". It took considerable effort to change many of these attitudes and beliefs, a change that was critical to our credibility and work. However, our patience was continually tested, as demonstrated by a property owner who notified state and local police, the S.P.C.A., and state wildlife officials demanding our arrest because we had stolen THEIR owls. In fact, the birds had fledged.

Besides contending with problems and attitudes relative to the barn owl, we also sometimes had problems with the stereotyped attitudes towards scientists or any outsiders in these rural areas. In some cases there was considerable skepticism initially towards us, but as we interacted more with better known individuals locally and discussed our work with community leaders, many of the stereotyped attitudes and beliefs about scientists subsided.

Additionally, our vehicles, which were equipped for radiotelemetry and bioacoustic studies, were threatening to many people. We worked both day and night radio-tracking owls, and they often led us into areas where people had no idea what we were doing. The sight of our vehicles roaming country roads or city streets led to rumors that we were investigators of local police departments, narcotics investigators, ground control for the space shuttle, and CIA agents. We even had people try to place cable television orders with us. Explaining the truth to passer-bys often resulted in total disbelief and even threats for lying about the "real" nature of our activities. For example, the response of one individual to whom we showed all of our equipment and related owl methods was, "Boy they train the CIA well!". At times the inquiries became so frustrating that, when stopped away from the immediate study area, the only explanation that would be accepted was "It's top secret".

State police stopped us numerous times and on some occasions acted as if we were a major assault force. Total confusion erupted one day when we radio-tracked near a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. One farmer, who local rumor suggested was growing marijuana, ran from his house, jumped in his truck, and sped away as we drove up his lane. Even a drunk farmer attacked the tracking-vehicle one night and drove his car into a drainage ditch in the process. One's communication ability was put to the test under these circumstances. Presenting permits, explaining who funds the project and why, and stating names of cooperating and well-known local property owners were the key in these sometimes hazardous situations. We tried to notify all local police departments of our activities, in order to avoid confusion or to facilitate response when they got a suspicious call about owl-men in an illuminated vehicle that looked like a moon-lander. Although we worked hard at explaining the true nature of our equipment, when fighting the traffic at the Philadelphia airport while trying to pick up a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, and confronted by police, we had no alternative but to say "We're here to pick up a government agent". We were quickly directed through traffic and given a parking space.

We were contending with a variety of fixed beliefs and negative attitudes in the communities where we were working. Besides the direct public relations methods described, we also have relied heavily upon newspaper, radio, and television media. We appeared numerous times on a local radio station, and this gave people an opportunity to call and ask questions. Local radio talk-show hosts often discussed the project.

Being able to comment gracefully on a radio talk show when an elderly woman calls to tell you that she prays to the owl in her yard to bring her a husband, or keeping from laughing one night when a cameraman's wife runs hysterically for the vehicle when a rat runs beside her and she realizes an owl has been watching, are all part of the public relations effort. The media can sometimes provide excellent exposure to your research but also may provide less than satisfactory explanations when reporting on a science-related topic.

Public lectures can be excellent opportunities for you to directly explain your research to large numbers of people and give your skeptics an opportunity to ask questions and be exposed to people who are highly supportive of the project. Speaking

to school groups is an outstanding way to disseminate facts and science-related information. Not only do the students hear about the research, but so do the parents that evening from their children. Many students volunteered to help on our project, and thereby enhanced local involvement and cooperation. We found that a property owner may avoid listening to us, but that they could not as readily avoid listening to the enthusiasm and knowledge of their children or neighbors.

We also regularly distributed pamphlets that describe the natural history of the barn owl and its relationship to man. Additionally, whenever we captured or banded an owl, we gave everyone present an opportunity to pet or at least touch the owl.

Some property owners became highly zealous in their desire to get involved. One elderly gentleman continuously tried to "teach us" how to catch an owl, and in so doing, repeatedly disrupted our chances of catching the owl that nested in his barn. Another property owner wanted to check up on us late at night while we were trying to mist net an owl. This woman bounced out of the first mist net set, but we took her in the second one. The same woman told us one day that her white angora cat was missing; we quickly shoved our golden retriever back inside our van. Although there were interesting moments with our "get-involved" property owners, they typically were extremely helpful and often provided food, tools, or a much welcomed extra set of hands. We owe them considerable thanks.

Through our public relations efforts in our New Jersey study area, we have become well known on a personal level. Not only do people generally understand who we are and what our goals are, but we also have made it a point to learn their names, their children's names, and even the name of the family dog. (Only in one case did I get confused and spent the summer calling a property owner's son by the dog's name.)

Many individuals are not afraid now to ask questions about our work, and thereby many misconceptions about our methods and goals are avoided. Having the "owl-men" visit has become to many people as prestigious as having nesting owls. In all, the people trust us and recognize that our presence has brought a greater understanding of wildlife, research, and the relationship of agriculture and wildlife to their community. Many of the mysteries surrounding ourselves, our methods, and the animals we study have been resolved; and we are recognized as a source of dependable information on wildlife and vertebrate pests.

A greater public understanding of the ecological complexities of wildlife, and particularly those species which play a role in our socioeconomic lives, is needed as exemplified by our "model", barn owl research. However, when animals are involved, there often is a problem of local folklore and unjustified beliefs. It is difficult to change these attitudes, particularly when so many people look at complex ecological issues superficially and see only easy answers to these social, economic, and wildlife problems. However, through wise use of media, distribution of literature, direct contact and discussion, and demonstration of a sincere willingness to listen to the problems and interests of people that we encounter, public understanding of our methods and goals in environmental and vertebrate pest research should be enhanced.

Scientists must maintain a level of concern regarding vertebrate pest practices, their effect on target species, non-target species, and the environment as a whole, not only in order to develop the best control alternatives, but also as part of maintaining credibility with the public. There are no fixed public relations methodologies, because each person we encounter may bring to light new problems, criticisms, or misbeliefs. We must be adaptable in our ability to deal with people in order to achieve many of our research goals.